

## **MACKINDER'S HEARTLAND AND SPYKMAN'S RIMLAND THEORY**

The geopolitical history of the world has undergone a spatiotemporal analysis by political thinkers & geographers who had seen political history as the causation of geographical factors. The conflict between land & sea power was first hypothesized by *Alfred Thayer Mahan* in his book "The Influence of Sea Power upon History" who emphasized the spatio-political aspects of sea power and its significance from the point of view of military and economic expansion. His ideas were taken as foundation stones for two very important theories of geopolitics, put forward by Mackinder and Spykman respectively.

### **Mackinder's Heartland Theory**

*Halford Mackinder* was an English geographer, academician and politician, who is regarded as one of the founding fathers of both geopolitics and geostrategy. His theory is a spatial analysis of geopolitics in terms of its location, accessibility, and natural resource base. Mackinder interpreted history as essentially a struggle between Land & Sea Power and presented his paper "The Geographical Pivot of History" in 1904 in order to elucidate his formula of 'Geographical Causation in World History'.

#### **Statement of the Theory**

On the basis of physical map of the world, Mackinder concluded that on the global scale, the earth surface consisted of a huge & continuous landmass (Europe, Asia, and Africa) and some isolated islands e.g. North and South America, Australia, Great Britain, and Japan. He named this huge united landmass of Europe, Asia & Africa as the 'World Island' which accounts for 2/3rd of the total land area of Earth, being 11 Mn. sq. km and also about 7/8th or 88% of the total population of the world.

The concept of World Island is central to the theoretical precepts of Mackinder. He suggested that the Columbian era of sea power which had given Europe its pivotal role for the past four centuries (Colonial Era), was coming to a close & was being eclipsed by the ascendancy of land-based powers & in particular with a new 'Geopolitical pivot of History', namely, the Heartland of Europe-Asia.

Mackinder divided the world into a 3 Tier spatially organized system. His book contained the following map for the same:



The 3 tiers as postulated by Mackinder include:

1. Pivot Area or Heartland: It is surrounded by mountains on three sides and by the ice-bound Arctic on the North. It consisted of the whole Siberia & parts of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan).
  - It was surrounded by the vast icefields of Arctic in North, the Urals in West, Central Asian Highlands in South & East Siberian Highlands in East.
  - It was, thus, termed as a "Natural Fortress or the Uppermost Citadel of the world" as it was not accessible to sea powers.
  - The pivot area has a concentration of all natural resources – mineral, water, soil, forest, etc.
2. Inner Crescent: The Pivot Area was pictured by Mackinder as surrounded by an 'Inner' or 'Marginal' crescent, consisting of an arch of coastland & characterized by drainage into navigable seas.
  - This inner or marginal crescent consisted of the whole of Eurasia outside the Heartland.
  - It symbolizes the Sea Powers and includes –
    1. Europe
    2. South West Asia
    3. North Africa
    4. India
    5. China (some parts of China is in pivot area also)
  - Most of the human civilizations are located in the crescent and it is co-terminus with the old world i.e. Pre-Columbian.

3. Outer/Insular Crescent: Outside the Inner or Marginal crescent lies Mackinder's 3rd tier, which he named as the Outer or Insular crescent.
- Mackinder suggested it to have no geographical significance in the contemporary world.
  - It included the New World (North America, South America, other parts of Africa, Pacific Islands, Oceania).
  - It is designated as Outer Crescent because of its complete insularity from the mainland of Eurasia.

For Mackinder, the concept of World Island is central to this theoretical percept. For him, whoever could gain control of 'World Island' would be in an almost unstoppable position to dominate the entire globe. In his opinion, the Heartland having sufficient resources could conquer Europe, Middle East & Far East. The inner and outer crescent would follow later.

#### Modified Concept of Strategic Heartland, 1919

In 1919, he modified his theory & presented it again in his book "Democratic Ideals and Reality". It was a much elaborate theory & probably, the most voluminous work in the entire field of political geography. The Pivot Area was modified & it was renamed as the Heartland. He redefined Heartland as the region to which sea power can be refused access. Heartland was much larger & it included the Volga Basin, Steppes, Himalayas, Baltic Sea, Black Sea, Asia Minor, etc. Because of the fall of the Russian empire and the emergence of the USSR as a superpower (Bolshevik Revolution), Mackinder became more assertive in his theory of Heartland. The world power seemed to be centralized around the Heartland which he said had all the resources and natural defence by the physiographic factors. It seemed invincible and represented the supremacy of land power. He considered the South West Ukrainian Steppes as the only gateway to the Heartland – it was called the South Western Corridor. His second tier or the Inner Crescent now included the British Isles & whole of Africa. The outer crescent consisted of New World. Mackinder's famous dictum caught the attention of the World –

*"Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland;*

*Who rules Heartland commands the World-Island;*

*Who rules the World-Island commands the World"*



The key to control the Heartland, Mackinder later argued, lay in Eastern Europe. The 'Heartland' is the strongest fortress on Earth, commanding resources of a huge Trans-Continental Area. Any power that could organize it effectively was bound to emerge as a great power in world politics.



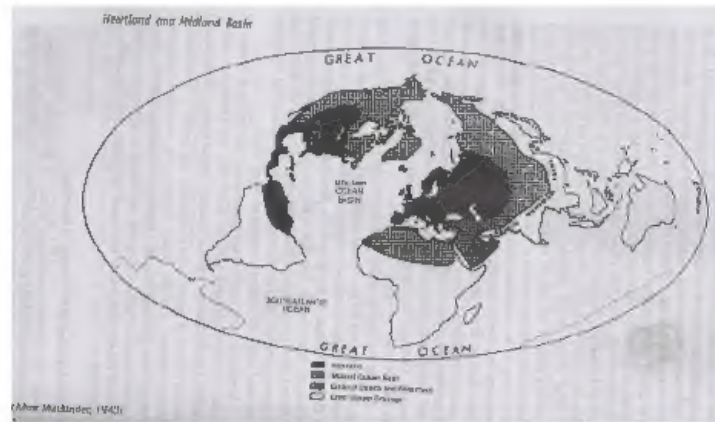
#### Modified Concept of Midland basin, 1943

Until 1919, Mackinder had confined his attention to Eurasia and the Old World and did not give any attention to the New World. In the 1920s, he claimed that the west of Europe and east of North America are physical complements of one another. During the Second World War, Mackinder's theory was put to test. The Heartland could have become the focus of power if either Russia had united with Germany or Russia had been overthrown by China or Japan. In the 2nd World War (1939-45), the USA emerged as another superpower and the intense geopolitical rivalry between USSR and US-UK combine was foreseeable.

The outcome of World War was palpable in the early 1940s, therefore Mackinder was quick to reverse his theory before his death in 1943, in a magazine, "Foreign Affair", where he published his theory – "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace". In the paper, Mackinder clearly recognized that the two sides of the North Atlantic were bound together. He postulated a new idea of Midland Basin, where he included US-UK combine as the parallel world power to the Heartland (mainly, USSR).

Midland Basin included the countries that surrounded the Midland Ocean i.e. Western Europe (France, Belgium, Britain, etc) and North America. He regarded this area as an effective counterbalance to the emerging political power potential of Eurasian Heartland. He stated that the UK & New England regions of the USA (older regions of 6 colonies) have a single race of

people, uniform cultures, isotropic geographical conditions, similar resource base. Thus, they are one civilization.



The North Atlantic water presented no obstacle to their interaction. Rather, it is a facilitator due to similar features. Thus, there is a definite political communion between these two nations and at the geopolitical front, they present a unitary coherent picture. Thus, there are 2 power centres in the world –

- Heartland (mainly, USSR)
- Midland Basin (mainly, US-UK combine)

In 1943, he excluded from the Heartland that part of the Soviet Union lying to the east of the Yenisei River. He named it as Lena Land. Owing to its rugged topography and forest cover, this region was of little economic value. He envisioned the two centres of power- Heartland & Midland, to be surrounded & insulated by a guide of deserts – Sahara, Arabian, Iranian, Tibetan, and Mongolian, extending through the rugged and desolate Lena Land to Alaska, the Canadian Arctic, and the deserts of Western America. Mackinder thought that this empty land and deserts will prevent the spread of conflict to the outside world.



## Applications of the Theory

The applications of the Mackinder's Theory can be analysed and concluded through a set of major world events:

- Pre-Cold War (before 1945): Contemporary history between 1st World War and 2nd World War has many events that can lead us to believe that Mackinder was true in his conviction. The Bolshevik Revolution & emergence of USSR as a Superpower (Land Power), the outcome of 1st World War and the defeat of Germany (Sea Power), the spread of Communism in East Europe under influence of USSR and the entire world geopolitics hovering around East Europe show that the Heartland as postulated by Mackinder did hold a strategic importance.
- Spread of Cold War (1945-91): Heartland was represented by USSR & Midland by US-UK combine in the modified theory of Mackinder of 1943. Cold War was a conflict between Capitalism & Communism and not a proper war in the field. Most of the geopolitics was centered around either East Europe or West Asia which had the resources as well as peripheral location or transition location forming part of Inner Crescent. Present geopolitics can also be linked to it including Crimean Annexation, West Asian Crisis which are a part of Inner Crescent. Some of the major events that happened during this period include:
  - Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) – It demonstrated the power of Heartland & Midland as depicted by Mackinder in 1943. The event also showed power balance in the world which depicted two centres of power. The installation of missiles in East Europe by the USA was counteracted by USSR, installing the missiles at Cuba to threaten the USA.
  - West Asian Crisis – It was where both USSR and USA were involved in forming a strategic alignment with countries to assert their power e.g. USSR with Iraq and Afghanistan, the USA with Saudi Arabia/Israel.
  - Geopolitics of Indian Ocean – Withdrawal of the UK from the Indian Ocean which was called the British Lake (1850s-1973) (initially Portuguese lake) and also loss of control of Suez Canal to Egypt are some of the important events. USA intervened in the Indian Ocean under the pretext that USSR can politicize



and colonize the region and hence, the region needs a power balance. So, the USA started constructing naval bases in the Indian Ocean. Wars in Indian Ocean such as Vietnam War, Korean War, etc. also showed power balances in the world.

- Post-Cold War (After 1991): After 1991, a unipolar world emerged with the USA and the Heartland had fallen. With Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the future can witness the re-emergence of Russia though it has lost its economic power/superpower but not the defence technology and strategic alignments. A possible strategic triad between Moscow, Beijing, and New Delhi (BRICS- the collective of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and multiple alignments taking place all over the world indicate the shift towards the emergence of a Multipolar world.

### Criticism of the Theory

Mackinder simplified history in a deterministic fashion as a struggle between land and sea powers, which is far from truth. History is influenced by physical, socio-economic and cultural factors with conflict of interests and not just geographical factors.

Mackinder constructed his theory on basis of Mercator's map projection and he thought that the USA & Russia are thousands of miles apart and that Arctic ice fields are largely expansive. But actually, the USA is hundreds of miles from Siberia (Bering Strait). He wrongly equated power potential with the sheer geographical area, a factor that made him overinflate the resource base & power potential of the inner Asian Heartland. He tried to explain the present and prognosticate the future in terms of technology that has become outdated.

He overlooked the fact that Heartland was a region of permanent difficulties because of its interior location and owing to the extremes of climate. It is too cold in winter and parts of it are hot and dry in summer, therefore owing to these locational climatic factors, the Heartland is at a relative disadvantage as compared to other larger & well-endowed areas. He could not foresee the air age and his theories are a product of the zenith of the rail age in Europe. Heartland is easily accessible, crossing all the barriers, with the help of airplanes. Heartland is not as resourceful as it is made out to be and the greater part of it is a wasteland, incapable of supporting a large population. With the development of technology and fast-moving fighters,

ballistic and cruise missiles, the fortress i.e. Heartland now lays open to air raids from all sides, as much as any other place.

Nuclear deterrence is the new policy that emerged after the Japan bombings. It is a fact that geopolitics has migrated from Germany to North America after the 2nd World War and in the current scenario, geopolitics is shifting towards Asia with China and India emerging as new power centres.

The geographical causation of history is questionable. Geographical factors are subordinate to man's technology (Possibilistic thought which says that a man can overcome barriers by various means). With the rapid growth of Science & Technology, the surface configuration of Earth has become much less significant politically than it was at the time when Mackinder presented his 'pivot area'. The real world was not flat but spherical, and the flat earth map used by Mackinder to utilize the pivot area thesis has led to a false sense of world geography.

Above all, the theory holds a significant position in the field of Political Geography. With its generalisations and simplistic view of the power balance in the world, the play of geopolitics can be understood easily from its perspective. However, it has been posed with several criticisms and though its applications can be traced back to some of the major world events that have taken place, it has been rendered as a mere theory in papers with very little predictive value. The theory was soon replaced by Spykman's Rimland theory that presented a better alternative to the understanding of world geopolitics.

### **Spykman's Rimland Theory**

*Nicholas Spykman* was an American political scientist who was one of the founders of the classical realist school in American foreign policy, transmitting Eastern European political thought to the United States. In 1944, Spykman, as the point of critic or antithetic to the Heartland Theory, presented his work titled "The Rimland Theory" in his book – "The Geography of Peace". He gave a different interpretation of the relative importance of Heartland (Land Power) vis-a-vis the surrounding Inner and Outer Crescent.

### **Statement of the Theory**

The theory has been based on the two basic postulates of Mackinder –



- Geographical Causation of History
- The conflict between land power and sea power

Spykman, based on the same premises, built a new geopolitical model where the sea power was supreme and land power being inaccessible is inferior. Sea power has faster movement, greater accessibility while land can be inaccessible due to hills, rivers, deserts, etc. Sea Powers have more than 2/3rd population of the world and thus, are full of human & technological resources. Most of the population is located in coastal areas.

Spykman considered geographical features as important determinants in foreign policy because of the emphasis on spatial variations. In medieval human history and the pre-modern era, naval power had supremacy over the land power as they had navigation technology, ships, etc. e.g. British, French, German, Portuguese, Spanish, Italy were all sea powers and whole world soon became the colonial house of these countries.

Spykman gave emphasis on maritime mobility as the basis of a new type of geopolitical structure. According to him, it is the sea power that governs the relationships between Old and New World. To Spykman, the Heartland appeared “less important than the Rimland” as Heartland could not support a large population due to extremes of climate in Central Siberia. He was convinced that it is a combination of land and sea powers controlling the Rimland that would in all probability control the “essential power relations of the world”.



Spykman's theory postulated a 2 Tier system of the world geopolitics. He divided the world into only two tiers-

i. Inner Core

It is similar to the Heartland. Spykman said that Heartland is a region of physiographic difficulties with barriers and extreme climatic constraints such as in Siberia. The resources are dormant and human population is absent. It is neither a natural fortress nor the protected land. It is pilferable from many parts allowing access to others such as the central Asian deserts, Steppes, low mountains, river valleys which are several gateways. Moreover, this region is inhabited by tribes and has primitive civilization and by no means, it can affect the geopolitics of the world. It is a Land of Miseries with no prosperity.

ii. Rimland

Similar to the Inner Crescent and having all the majestic sea powers, which scripted the history of modern civilization, all the area of Rimland is connected to water i.e. the seas or oceans e.g. China, India, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Gulf countries, etc.

Spykman's famous dictum was-

*"Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia,*

*Who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the World "*



Writing at the time when the 2nd World War was still on, Spykman advocated that the allied powers such as Britain, France, etc. should base their future foreign policy on preventing any consolidation of Rimland and the enemy.

Applications of the Theory

In the era of colonisation, Sea Powers like the British, French, Portugal, Spain captured and demonstrated their superiority. The naval power was significant. Formation of the Indian Ocean Rim (including Australia & New Zealand) is an effort to consolidate the Rimland through regional groupings such as Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IOR-ARC), etc. Other groups like ASEAN have a focus on similar objectives. Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean & all the world superpowers entering the Indian Ocean also signifies the importance of Rimland e.g. Raisina Dialogue, Pivot to Asia policy of USA, etc. K.M. Panikkar had remarked in the 1970s – “Who controls the Rimland has India at its mercy”.

In this context, understanding USA’s intervention in West Asia & Gulf Countries could give a good insight. During the cold war period, Eastern Europe was the zone of contention between the superpowers – Cuban Missile Crisis and National Missile Defence Strategy of USA. But after 1950, all major wars were fought in Rimland – North-South Korea, Sino-India, Arab-Israel War, Indo-Pak war, Gulf crisis, Afghanistan-Iran-Iraq war, etc.

With the defeat of Germany in the 2nd World War and the emergence of the USSR as the sole master of Heartland, Spykman’s prescription became the basis of American policies of Containment of Communism. North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), Baghdad Pact & subsequently, Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) & Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) were made by the USA to keep an eye on the defence of Rimland, mainly European and Asian Countries, and to prevent the Soviet influence in warm waters of Rimland.

### Criticism of the Theory

The theory has been criticised on the ground of advancement of war technology and nuclear deterrence. Spykman underestimated the role of the world community & UNO in promoting world peace. The world today is largely being understood as a global village and international law doesn’t permit territorial expansion i.e. Ratzel’s Lebensraum was no longer applicable which considered State as a living organism and motivated Hitler for a Greater German Reich. It is the time of economic imperialism and not of political colonization.

The theory also comes as a highly generalised perspective of the world geopolitics. It does not take into consideration the technological innovations which exert a significant influence on the



world events today. This theory, though has had empirical evidences, is found to have a low predictive value.

However, despite the criticisms, the Rimland theory seems to have more importance over Heartland theory and a greater relevance in the current scenario. At least 40% of the world resources are in the Rimland area such as oil, continental shelf resources, etc. Rimland countries have huge population e.g. India, China, etc. Consisting mostly of developing nations, much of the area is constantly under political turmoil and the 'developed' powers of the world are always looking forward to getting their vested interests fulfilled from these nations. Keeping these factors in light, it seems that the Rimland area has a more strategic location geopolitically and that Spykman might have been partially correct in his postulation.